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CHAPTER XIII.

SPADES.

The rich variety of the rural scene is perhaps best illustrated in that most characteristic of Irish implements, the spade. It is worth recalling that the spade-work of immigrant navvies—or "navigators," named after the canal-diggers—was one of Ireland's contributions to England's Industrial Revolution. A visit to city garden-plots will provide a useful introduction to the study of spades, for the countryman insists on his own pattern, and you may play the game of spotting the native heaths of Belfast's or Dublin's retired policemen by identifying the spades of Derry, Fermanagh, Cavan or Clare. Some idea of the variety of tastes catered for can be gained from the output of a Galway spade-factory: including turf spades (Chapter 15) it turns out about 150 shapes of blade.

Obviously it would require prolonged travel and study to record and interpret this fascinating diversity, and to compare the distribution of spade-types with landforms and territorial divisions, with dialects, folk-customs, house-types and other aspects of material culture. But it is possible to give some tentative generalisations which emerge from a preliminary study. The primary division is between the one-eared and the two-eared types (Fig. 61). The former, known as the "loy" or "fack," prevails along the western and southern coasts. It is now unknown in the Six Counties—though the "kīb," as it was called, is remembered by a few old men—and is fast disappearing from Donegal and from the Midlands,

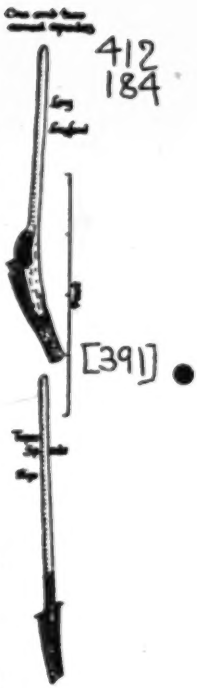

Fig. 61.

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These two-eared spades are always attached to the haft by means of straps about 6 inches long, generally with two rivets: the foot-plates are fastened to the blade by mortice and tenon and to the handle by a drawn-down tongue bent up and nailed between the straps (Fig. 62). A visit to one of the 9 or 10 Irish spade "factories"—there were many more a few decades ago—provides a thrilling illustration of craftsmanship and co-ordination of labour. The five hundredweight tilt-hammer, driven by a water wheel, beats out the red steel in a series of operations under the skilled hand and eye of the spade-maker: between each process the steel must be re-heated, and the interchange of the "moulds" and "plates" between furnace-man and hammer-man goes on without pause, for the "bit" of the hammer must not be allowed to strike without having the hot metal ready on the anvil. In addition to supplying his mate, the furnace-man has to bend over the "fullered mould" and weld and shape it on a small anvil: he must also apply sand and water to the plates if they get overheated, and dip the folded end in dust so that the two straps do not weld together under the hammer. After a period of ceaseless labour and watchfulness a pile of blue-grey drawn plates, their hammer grooves throwing back the glow of the furnace, lies ready for the finishing smith.

He shears them to the desired dimensions—all the measuring is done by eye although there are dozens of different sizes—cuts out the tenons and punches the rivet holes. The points of the straps separate when the ends are clipped, and the socket is now opened up and shaped on a mandrel. Then comes the finishing: the plate is heated once more, hammered into the correct lift and dish, and tempered. Meanwhile lengths of rivets have been cut and the foot-plates drawn down: the ash handle is inserted and riveted, the straps hammered tight against the wood and the foot-plates morticed and nailed on. Four generations of experience lay behind the smith whom I watched recently in a Co. Antrim spade factory; the result was a product of exquisite proportions and economy of structure, the essentials of the country craft.

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391 326 412 We must visit a factory in the south if we wish to see the single-eared "Irish" spade being made. The country smith may still forge or repair an occasional loy, but the trip-hammer does away with so much heavy sledging that most of the work is concentrated in the "factories." Yet, as the amazing variety of patterns demonstrates, there is no tendency towards specialization: the factory has merely taken over the work of dozens of rural smiths. Thus at least five different types of loy are used in Co. Galway alone. The blade may be straight sided, it may taper slightly or it may expand towards the mouth, and like the two-eared spade it may have a cranked or a round lift; but it is always narrow, ranging in width from 3½ to 5 inches. The loy is in fact a specialized implement, adapted for sod-cutting and ridge-making (Chapter 10); it is not designed to turn over dug soil, and like the two-eared spade which has taken over its functions in the north and east, it enters the ground at an angle and not vertically.

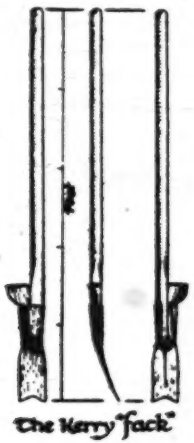

Fig. 63.

412 In the south-west, from Clare round to Kilkenny, the "fack" ends in a fish-tail, presumably to facilitate penetration (Fig. 63). In central Galway the loy has a 14 inch

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While it is difficult to estimate the antiquity of the two-eared spade tradition in Ulster and Leinster, its spread into the west has taken place in the last half century. The decline in the use of the loy is symbolic of the disappearance of the old fashions, and they tend to vanish together because the culture pattern is a closely interwoven web. Thus it was considered in Donegal a century ago that the new iron spades " would be useless," since few workers had shoes: the wooden spade was adapted to the bare feet.

The spade-maker is called on to turn out other types of agricultural tools, spades, shovels and forks. There is the very narrow tapered draining spade and the heavy " mountain draining spade " used in the moorland areas of the north and west (Fig. 64): its great " shark's head " blade is 17 inches long and almost as wide. Occasionally he is asked to rough out a flachter (Fig. 85), which the country smith finishes into the required shape, or it may be, in the south-west, a graffan or heavy hoe (Chapter 10). But as the turf-cutting season comes round most of his energies go into the making of turf slanes (Chapter 15). Of shovels there are several different types, generally classified into two shapes, round-pointed and square-pointed: the latter kind is favoured in the west. There is also the tanged shovel of Co. Wexford. The shovels are long-handled, but short handles are used for special purposes. The welding of the socket in the thin hard steel of the shovels is one of the smith's most difficult tasks (Fig. 65).

Then there are short and long-handled square-shouldered digging forks with three or with four prongs (Fig. 65), and the round-shouldered manure-forks or graips, the prongs of which may be round, oval, or in old-fashioned work, square. There are drags for unloading manure, for gathering wrack (Fig. 103), for cleaning drains and gathering stones. Hay-forks may be tanged or strap-hafted, with 4-foot or 5-foot handles and so on. Some country-made forks are illustrated in Fig. 66. It may be added that hayforks with wooden prongs cut from the solid have also been used in the past. Some of the loys, like the old Ulster kib, are essentially wooden spades merely shod with iron, and even this was dispensed with in sandy soils. Wooden

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314 handled variety the story is told that on old turf-cutter at Coolnagoppoge, on seeing his first aeroplane pass overhead, reported that he had seen "the devil riding a flachter!"

314 413 The prepared turf bank may now be cut in one of two ways, either by "breasting" or by digging "underfoot." Different types of spade or "slane" are required according to which method is adopted, and within these two groups of slanes there is a multitude of regional styles and shapes. In breast-work the digger stands facing the turf bank, and thrusts in his spade horizontally, whereas in underfooting he stands on the bank and cuts vertically. Many factors enter into the distribution of these two digging-modes: the nature and grain of the peat, the depth of the face, and the local tradition. I have seen both methods used side by side on the same mountain, but I have also met foot-slanesmen who had never seen a breast-slane and vice-versa. In the thin mountain bogs the underfoot method is customary, while breasting is favoured in the deep lowland mosses. The turf slane is clearly a specialized version of the narrow loy, with the addition of a side wing to cut out the turf at one stroke. The old styles take the handle in bent-over flanges like the loy, but the new fashions of "factory" spade have borrowed the straps of the "English" digging spade (Fig. 86). Slanes were formerly made by the country smith, and the spade-factories which now forge them must cater for the demands and tastes of innumerable provinces of local culture which correspond, if one may hazard a guess, with old territorial units such as the baronies.

Fig. 86.

One factor in the varying shapes is the angle made by the cutting edge of the wing with the mouth of the blade: it may be at right-angles but is more likely to be set backward or forward at an angle which may be as much as 23°. In the breast-slane it tends to be set back (Fig. 89), while in the foot-slane it may be set forward at a sharp angle (Fig. 86). The edge of the wing measures anything from 4½ to 7 inches: the mouth of the spade averages 4½ inches but I have seen them up to 6 inches. Details vary so much, in fact, that to generalize is dangerous. The top or back of the wing is treated